**Green Blades Preaching Roundtable**

* Year A: Baptism of Our Lord
* January 8, 2023

Lectionary Texts: Matt. 3:13-17; Isa. 42:1-9; Ps. 29; Acts 10:34-43

Repentance, Righteousness, Re-Membrance

 David Ackerson, Mountain Iron, Minnesota



 The Ecofaith imagery of the “green blade rising” draws our focus to the land, the solid earth from which our own bodies spring, the land we live on. With the Baptism Gospel, during the season of Epiphany, we have Word that more naturally calls us to focus on water, the flowing waters from which we emerge as Baptized beloved children of God. While our identity, who we see ourselves to be, seems to be more easily connected to the land from which we and our ancestors arose, let us take a look at our identities as beloved children of God flowing from the Baptism of Jesus through the lens of water.

 In the book “Healing Haunted Histories, A Settler Discipleship of Decolonization,” Enns and Myers, 2021, the authors speak of “landlines, bloodlines and songlines” as they trace family history of immigrant Mennonite ancestors from Ukraine to Canada, yet when referencing the land locations, “landlines,” they speak not of nations but of ***watersheds.*** They speak of ancestors who came from the Dnieper River Watershed and settled in the Saskatchewan River Watershed to farm on land where Indigenous First Nations people had lived for thousands of years. This use of the term “watershed” transcends national boundaries and focuses on the water flowages that have been present everywhere since the dawn of the Creation, even before humans lived there. They speak of these watersheds as “landlines, … geographies and landscapes of memory, struggle and contestation, affection, sustenance and identity – and hold deep stories of peoples’ placement and displacement.” They acknowledge how, while “Indigenous communities have long understood the most primal ‘Songline’ is nature herself, settler colonial culture, with its commodification of land and exploitation of nature, has been largely deaf to the earth’s voice.”

 For most ELCA Lutherans the stories of haunted settler history should ring true, as most of us could trace our ancestral landlines, bloodlines and songlines back to European watersheds from which our people migrated as settlers to the watersheds of the “New World” already inhabited by Native Americans.

 The watershed of the Jordan River, where the Baptismal Gospel happened, is located in the “Holy Land.” The Jordan River Watershed flows from north to south, including land of present-day nations named Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel, and Palestine. This Watershed, present since the dawn of Creation, does not know nor care nor acknowledge the nation states currently located within its flowage, nor those presuming to claim the land at any previous time in human history, including those named nations occurring throughout the Biblical stories of the Jewish people. This Holy watershed, flowing below the great Jerusalem, is where our Lord *submerged* his body as Jesus and *emerged* as the Christ, the beloved child of God.

 Let us contemplate the waters of Jesus’ Baptism, and the waters of your baptism as well. Have you ever sat on a riverbank watching the flowage? I have, and so has Bob Dylan. I know for me it was the Mississippi in St. Paul during college, around 1970-ish. For Bob, who knows, but I’d like to think it was also the Mississippi near the U. of M. when he was there about 60 years ago in the early 1960s.

 Here’s Bob, “Watching the River Flow”:

 … Oh, this ol’ river keeps on rollin’, though

 No matter what gets in the way and which way the wind does blow

 And as long as it does I’ll just sit here

 And watch the river flow

 Here’s me, about 40 years ago, “Everflow”:

 The reflection of the sunlight as it sparkles on the water

 Is more brilliant than a diamond in its glow

 And the wind lifting the waves is bringing water back to heaven

 Captured instant in eternal everlow

 Everflow, rain is flowing to the river

 Everflow, river’s flowing to the sea

 Everflow, sea is flowing up to heaven

 Everflow the spirit moves inside of me.

 So what does the flow of a watershed have to do with Baptism? Maybe you have an idea. Maybe some things are too sacred to attempt to explicate. Maybe we should simply ask the river, ask the watersheds of nature, and accept the mystery in the musings. Ps. 29:3, “The voice of the Lord is over the waters.” Yet I would suggest that as the river speaks from its source, even so does ***truth, emet***, as living water, “spring from the ground,” Ps. 85:11.

 We know that water takes many forms and we can find beauty in all. In Northern Minnesota in January, there is solid water, aka snow and ice, and always the liquid flow of the rivers, and also the humidity in the air as water in invisible (apart from fog and sundogs) form. Yet in all its forms, it remains water. Water is also the greater part of our bodies, as well as that green blade rising, the greater part of what sustains all life on the planet. Yet in each unique, individual manifestation, it is still part of the one, the universal waters of creation. Buddhists say, all is one. We followers of the Way of Christ can say that the unique individual human named Jesus *submerged* into the Jordan Watershed and then *emerged* not only as the Beloved Child, but as the Universal Christ, Mashiach, the Lord of the Universe, the embodiment of the Church.

 The Sufi poet Rumi, from ¾ a millennium ago, said, “you are not a drop in the ocean, you are the entire ocean in a drop.”

John Duns Scotus, Franciscan friar from ¾ a millennium ago, spoke of “haecceity,” and “univocity;” haecceity, or thisness, as the uniqueness of each individual part of creation, the beloved child we each claim in ourselves as the fruit of our Baptisms; and “univocity,” the oneness that binds all creation with one voice to Creator God. We can contemplate the uniqueness or thisness of Jesus; and also the univocity or universality of the Christ.

 About 140 years ago, Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins articulated the Scotus philosophy in “As Kingfishers Catch Fire”:

 As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;

 As tumbled over rim in roundy wells

 Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell’s

 Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;

 Each mortal thing does one thing and the same;

 Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;

 Selves – goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,

 Crying *What I do is me; for that I came.*

 I say more: the just (person) justices;

 Keeps grace: that keeps all (their) goings graces;

 Acts in God’s eye what in God’s eye (they are) –

 Christ – for Christ plays in ten thousand places,

 Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his,

 To the Father through the features of (people’s) faces.

Hopkins says, “the just person justices.” Jesus says to the Baptizer, the very beginning of his ministry, the very first words he speaks in Matthew’s Gospel, “Let it be so now, for it is proper in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Now we know Jesus didn’t actually speak those words in English, and the phrase “fulfill all righteousness” can be and has been construed by scholars to support whatever shades of theology they prefer, i.e. perhaps the “righteousness” of atonement for original sin, or in some way “right” or moral conduct conforming with God’s will for the salvation of mankind. Etcetera. But Jesus’ Aramaic was probably “tzedek,” close to the Hebrew “sedeq”, and simply means “justice” in a restorative, universal sense, just like in Hopkins’ poem. Even the Greek “dikaios” connotes this sort of “justice.” By fulfilling universal justice, sedeq, Jesus was pronouncing God’s judgment or “mishpat”, the unique action defining him as an individual person: per Hopkins, “What I do is me; for that I came.” Jesus also therefore invites each of us to claim our own unique thisness as Hopkins beautifully articulates, “act in God’s eye what in God’s eye we are, Christ—“, each of us just one of the playings in ten thousand places, these places of baptisms we can call ***watersheds***.

 From sedeq comes mishpat. The prophet Amos said it well, with the plumb line vision, Amos 7:7-15; and this is the vision of justice Jesus fulfilled with his Baptism. In the flow of the Jordan Watershed. Amos 5:24: “But let mishpat roll down like waters, and sedeq like an ever-flowing stream.”

 We, each of us, can look at our own Baptisms through this lens of the justice of water flow: the uniqueness and the univocity, the mishpat and the sedeq. For those of us Lutherans with European roots who are “native” to Northern Minnesota, i.e. whose ancestors dropped us off here within the last 100 – 150 years, what does our current adopted ***watershed*** look like? Fairly unique for sure. The land on which we live is near the apex of a rare “Triple Divide” that from the Ojibwe has been named “The Hill of Three Waters.” The exact spot is a few miles north of downtown Hibbing, preserved in the middle of Hibbing Taconite mining operations, a rock as big as a house and some acres of hardwoods. A mural by artist John Cook, 6 feet by 18 feet, hangs at Hibbing Community College. An inscription with the mural was written by noted Native author Linda LeGarde Grover, Bois Forte Ojibwe. She writes:

The Anishinaabeg of northern Minnesota have passed cultural teachings

 of history and worldviews down through many generations by way

 of the oral tradition. Because life and the world were created by the

Great Spirit, there is a sacredness to all life and all places. That sacredness

intertwines with the geological and environmental mystery of the

Hill of Three Waters site. This place where the sky is connected to Mother

Earth through precipitation – through her life’s blood, water – showcases

an ongoing cycle of the sacredness of creation.

 From the base of the large rock that was tumbled to the site by glacial activity during the last ice age, the Hill of Three Waters springs forth the interconnection of flowage for three large watersheds that drain a great part of North America, to Hudson Bay, the Gulf of Mexico and the Gulf of St. Lawrence. From the rock flowing north is the Shannon River, to the Sturgeon, to the Littlefork, to the Rainy River, into Canada and on up to Hudson Bay. Flowing south and west is the Prairie River, to the Mississippi in Grand Rapids, and on south to the Gulf of Mexico. Flowing south and east is Penobscot Creek to the St. Louis River, to Lake Superior and east through the Great Lakes. Think of it: all of that living water springing forth from the depths of the earth of Northern Minnesota, everflowing on down to the sea! John 7:38, John 4:14.

 Indigenous humans would most often travel on or along the waters, leaving pictographs as well as pottery and arrowhead evidence thousands of years old. Ojibwe stories speak of the tribes traveling upstream from all around a large radius to meet for councils at this place of the Hill of Three Waters. Today we acknowledge that there are remnants of the great Anishinaabeg peoples living in the traditional Three Waters Watershed, including those on the various “reservations” of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe: Red Lake, White Earth, Leech Lake, Bois Forte, Fond du Lac, Grand Portage; and in Wisconsin: Red Cliff, Bad River, Lac du Flambeau, Lac Courte Oreilles, St. Croix; and North Dakota: Turtle Mountain; and Canada: many First Nations reserves in the northern flowing watershed. From all of these places, the Anishinaabeg ancestors could travel upstream to the point of the sacred Triple Divide of the Hill of Three Waters.

Today, those many springs of living water in the flowage of these watersheds have been substantially disturbed by white settler activities, including not just clear cutting of the majestic white pines, but also mining, and, in the western Missouri River flowage into the Mississippi, by oil drilling and fracking, with spills and destruction. The Minnesota Mesabi Iron Range, the “Sleeping Giant” was disturbed from its slumber over 100 years ago.

 So now let us Upper Midwest ELCA Lutherans consider the sacrament of Baptism in the context of our story line, and to use the language of Ennes and Myers, in our landlines, bloodlines and songlines. Let it be so now, as may be proper in this way to fulfill all sedeq. Matt. 3:15.

Sacrament, means of grace, Baptism of not only water for repentance but baptism by the Christ with the Holy Spirit and fire, Matt. 3:11. Martin Luther is said to have used a mantra: “Remember Your Baptism” and put the words on a plaque in his room. This was 500 years ago, in chronos, in chronological time. Yet in terms of kairos, or the time of “Holy Spirit and Fire,” Luther’s words become sacramental for our present time and journey. Luther was not merely reminding himself that he was a baptized person in the same way as the Jewish leaders of the time of the Baptizer and Jesus would seem to like to remind everyone that Abraham was their father. In contemporary terms, one might be heard to say, “I’m baptized, I’m saved, I’m a Christian, so leave me alone.” Luther was saying much more. Our baptisms are not merely in chronos, but in kairos: the baptism of *repentance* is a full re-configuration, changing our very identity as a child of God, a child of The Way. Through the Christ this comes with sacrament: Holy Spirit and Fire.

 We not only remember the past chronos fact that we have been baptized and therefore, yes, we in fact are “saved”; moreover, also may we join the dance, jump in the water, as we re-member the kairos future of the Way; as we re-configure who we are in the Church, the Body of Christ the Mashiach. So, my baptism is not some sort of crystalline ball of watery chronos that I can hang from the Christmas Tree of my life’s journey, and say, “yeah, you betcha, I’m a child of Abraham, I’m a ‘Christian’ and the Church is part of my Way.” My baptism is more: it is a captured instance of eternal kairos everflow wherein I as a member of the Body of Christ, the Way, do my part to re-member the future, put back together the univocity of my thisness, of our “thisnesses,” if you will. This is sacrament, this is the Holy Spirit and Fire, so ***the Church is not part of my Way, it is The Way***. It is not a way that we find or manage, it is a Way that finds us. We do not choose this Way; the Way chooses us. We can only then say “yes, bring on the Holy Spirit, bring on the Fire,” and, Luke 1:28, with Mary, “let it be with us according to your word.”

 We often tend today to participate in the Way as spectators. We have many devices and ways to turn on and plug in and just watch. Even with Bob Dylan, you might be inclined to say he was just sitting on the bank watching the river flow, didn’t really jump in. Yet he really did what was his to do: he wrote about it, sang about it, allowed the Creator to create a beautiful piece of art that keeps shining light to show us the Way. Likewise, it then is up to each of us to heed the call and jump into that river flow ourselves as it is ours to do, and to each say, “what I do is me, for this I came.”

Brothers and sisters, let us stand together in the flowing stream of our identified watershed, the

flowing stream of our own baptisms by our Lord, with not only transfiguration (repentance), but with

Holy Spirit and Fire: as Way, as Church, as Body of Christ. Let us feel the flow from that spring of living

water all around our mortal bodies, flowing from chronos to kairos; from mishpat to sedeq; from

haecceity to univocity; from remembering the fact of our baptisms to re-membering, re-membrance of

our future together as Church, as Way, as we journey together and flow towards that great shining City

of God. Amen.

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*Mountain Iron, Minnesota, where he was a parishioner of Rev. Kristin Foster for almost 20 years.*

*He is has been active in N. E. Mn Synod ministries including Grounded in Grace, Together Here, and*

*Anchor Church.*



**Green Blades Preaching Roundtable**

The Second Sunday after Epiphany (A)

January 15, 2023

Commemoration of Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday

Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-11; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1: 29-42

Kristin Peterson, Synodically Authorized Minister, rural Hermantown, Minnesota

The challenge for the preacher who intends to preach for the whole creation on this Sunday is heightened by the various options of the lectionary texts, along with the opportunity to commemorate the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. In an effort to wade into this challenge, I ask you to consider the image of a three-legged stool.  I came across this image when I was gathering background information for a new course that I would be teaching at Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College, “Introduction to Sustainability.”  In order to create sustainability, one needs to find a way to balance Economy, Equality, and the Environment. Let’s look at what unfolds when we present all three “legs” in the context of a sermon for this Sunday.

**First, the leg of** **economy.** The word, economy, has its roots in two Greek words: *oikos* which means ‘house’ and *nemein* which means ‘to manage.’ In the church, the lectionary is one way in which we manage our house. One could say that it is the basis for our economy as church. It provides us with a structure for preaching.  In today’s text Isaiah is addressing Israel after their return from Babylon. The text, one of the four Servant Songs, identifies the servant as both Israel (v.3) and as an individual who is given a mission to Israel (v.5) and to all nations (v.6). In the concluding verse we are reminded that the Lord who chooses is faithful.

If you do not usually include the Psalm as part of your worship experience, consider incorporating it into this Sunday’s liturgy.  It is rich with imagery that could be used to support your preaching, including God’s actions towards us, God’s plans, as well as God’s faithfulness and steadfast love.

The theme of God’s faithfulness continues in Paul’s letter to the congregation at Corinth. It is through God’s son, Jesus, that we have the strength and spiritual gifts to respond to God’s call. The nature of that call is highlighted in our Gospel for today.  Jesus says to Andrew and Simon Peter, here identified as disciples of John the Baptist, to “Come and see (v.39).”

How does God demonstrate faithfulness to God’s creation as we humans ransack the house more than care for it? Who is the Christ for us today , in this wounded creation, that we are inviting people to “Come and see”?

Now **the second leg of the stool**, **equality.** Looking to the second leg of our stool, the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. provides us with an example of an individual who sought equality for the African American people during a time of segregation. To have a better understanding of his teachings, I recommend that you take the time to read or re-read his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”  Just as the people of Israel during the time of Isaiah were unwilling to change their ways, the white people of the South had little interest in changing their ways. Before inequality can be addressed, it must be brought out into the open.  It must be seen before there can be change.

In spite of Martin Luther King, Jr. 's best efforts, we still live in a country and a world filled with inequality. We do not want to ’come’ because we do not want to ‘see.’ Here is or an opportunity for the preacher to highlight the current inequalities, the inequities that individuals of various minority groups continue to face. In his “Letter”, Dr. King reminds us that individuals should always be treated in the words of the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, as participating in a subjective relationship, ‘I to thou,’ rather than being treated as an object in an ‘I to it’ relationship.

This provides an opportunity to transition to **the third leg of our stool:** **our relationship with our environment**. Do we treat it, the more-than-human-creation, as an object or a subject? Do we see the earth as something to use, or as something to embrace and cherish? Here there is also the opportunity to talk about balance. As we seek to care for God’s wonderful creation, we must do so in an equitable way. While working to improve, restore, heal our environment, we must take care to not bring harm to individuals who have been victims of previous injustices. We must also be aware that marginalized peoples are the most likely to suffer from environmental injustice, environmental racism, and the effects of climate change. This task will not be easily accomplished because, as Dr. King pointed out, privileged groups are seldom willing to give up their privilege voluntarily.  People are often unwilling to change. Just look at Israel. In spite of all the urgings, proclamations, and warnings of God’s prophets, Israel resisted change. Even today, despite the teachings of Jesus, many Christian church bodies are unwilling to embrace the need for change in either our relationships with people or the environment.

Creating a three-legged stool that is evenly balanced is not an easy task, however, preaching God’s word, working to achieve equality and equity for all people, as well as caring for this earth, are tasks that are worthy of being wrestled with. Therefore, my wish for you during this season of Epiphany, is that by facing these challenges you discover illumination, enlightenment, and a deeper understanding of Jesus’ call to each and every one of us. I invite you to “Come and See” and embrace the mystery.

*Kristin M. Peterson and her husband Tracy Close live in rural Hermantown outside of Duluth, MN. Kristin currently serves as the Synod Authorized Minister for Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Twig. She has a B.A. in Church Music as well as an M.A. in Religion and an M.M. in Music Education.  For 27 years she taught courses in music and philosophy at Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College in Cloquet, MN. She has also served a variety of churches as organist and/or choir director. Living in the Northland provides her with daily reminders of how important it is to care for this wonderful creation that God has entrusted to us.*



**Green Blades Preaching Roundtable**

* Third Sunday after Epiphany
* The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity
* January 22, 2023

Lectionary Texts: Matthew 4:12-23; Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1, 4-9; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Rachel Wyffels, Luther Seminary Student, St. Paul, Minnesota

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is an ecumenical practice observed annually, which falls from January 18-25th in 2023. The origins of the practice date back to the 18th century, and the first “Church Unity Octave” was observed in 1908. Since that time, it has continued to grow in Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant traditions, and is now jointly sponsored by the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

This observance is a particularly exciting year for us as Minnesotans because the Minnesota Council of Churches (MCC) convened and prepared materials in collaboration with the Vatican and the World Council of Churches. This year’s theme is “Do good; seek justice” (Isaiah 1:17). Minnesota church leaders involved in the process include:

Rev. Dr. DeWayne L. David

Rev. Jia Starr Brown

Rev. Anthony Galloway

Presiding Elder Rev. Stacy L. Smith

Ms Leslie E. Redmond Esq.

Rev. Dr. Kelly Sherman Conroy

Rev. Jim Bear Jacobs

Rev. Antonio Machado

Rev. Dr. Curtiss DeYoung

Rev. Dr. Amy Gohdes-Luhman

I encourage you to take time to read through the entire resource that was compiled, which includes a historically grounded introduction, an ecumenical worship service centered around water and stone, and scriptural reflections for each of the eight days. You can find the full resource [here](https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/2023-WPCU-ENG.pdf).

Indigenous traditions are at the heart of this year’s liturgical practice. Water is a central theme throughout the order of worship. The document states,

 The connection between stone and water in the Native Minnesota context is about understanding the value and importance of life. In most Native American wisdom, water and stone occupy sacred positions. Water is life and stones represent the sacredness of the ground upon which many generations have stood. All of creation is endowed with the Spirit of God, therefore we are all related. Two symbols will be used in the worship service: water, representing our baptism into new life and stone representing our personal and ancestral history. (p. 9)

It is important that we know and recognize that the inclusion of these central indigenous contributions in this process and document was hard-fought. I had the opportunity to hear Rev. Dr. Kelly Sherman Conroy talk about the process at the White Church Truths event in Minneapolis this fall. Rev. Dr. Conroy shared that indigenous thought and tradition was frequently separated from “Christian” tradition in the process that led to this document. At one point, a member of the process’s leadership responded to her contribution with a statement along the lines of, “Well that’s great; now let’s make it Christian.” In our observance of this week, it is important to recognize that the doctrine of discovery continues to influence who is allowed to be a part of our circles of unity and who is not, and what kind of power dynamics continue to exist in systematic and individual ways. As we incorporate this resource, I think we should also include a prayer of gratitude and an embodied commitment to dismantle the doctrine of discovery in our systems and communities, following the lead of indigenous peoples and leaders.

In reflecting on the quoted paragraph above, I am drawn to thinking about how our practice during this week of prayer for Christian unity might draw us closer in our relationship with the whole body of Christ, including all creation.

Too often we think of unity in the context of singularity, in setting aside some parts of our traditions for a general sense of agreement and camaraderie. It is true that there are disagreements that can and should be set aside in the life of the church and the work of the Kingdom of God. Yet at the same time, I suggest that a general sense of unity is not what this week is about. Instead of concentrating solely on our role as unifier, we are invited this week to realize our identity as the unified. We are made new creation in the body of Christ, unified and made whole with the holy interdependence that underlies all creation. As the writers of the ecumenical liturgy suggest, our “personal and ancestral history” as living stone are unified with “the ground upon which many generations have stood.”

For us on this week, our identity as the unified celebrates our embodied relationship with all creation and renews our spirits as we work in the body of Christ for justice and health for all the world. I close with a prayer from the liturgy that expresses this well:

**L** Holy Spirit, you create anew the face of the earth. The summit of the mountains, the thunder of the sky, the rhythm of the lakes speak to us –

**C** Because we are connected.

**L** The faintness of the stars, the freshness of the morning, the dewdrops on the flower speak to us –

**C**  Because we are connected.
**L** The voices of the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized speak to us –
**C** Because we are connected.
**L** But above all, our hearts soar to you.

Rachel Wyffels is in her first year of her Master of Divinity at Luther Seminary. She is also the EcoFaith Network Communication Coordinator for the EcoFaith Network NE-MN and Saint Paul Area Care of Creation. Rachel previously worked as a Hunger Advocacy Fellow with ELCA Advocacy, where she worked on legislative advocacy for hunger, housing, and climate justice. She is a graduate of St. Olaf College, and she enjoys playing violin, knitting, and spending time with her dog in her free time.



**Green Blades Preaching Roundtable**

**Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, Year A**

 January 29th, 2023

Micah 6:1-8-Psalm15-1 Corinthians 1:18-31-Matthew 5:1-12

Luke Pederson, Strum, WI

Although we are in the midst of the winter season, our text from Matthew, the Beatitudes, brings to mind for me Easter Sunday, and the special sunrise service the parish I serve holds every year on top of a hill. Following a narrow and twisting road takes you to the hilltop and a natural amphitheater formed from the construction of the road, trees all around and a white wooden cross overlooking the clearing. Modes of transportation vary for the sunrise worship-from cars and trucks to tractors and horses-as the early risers gather in the growing light of Easter morning in God’s good creation to proclaim Christ risen and share in the Lord’s Supper. Depending on when Easter falls on the calendar, it can either be wintery with snow on the ground, or pleasant and mild with the first signs of green grass and buds on the trees. Wild Turkeys may be heard gobbling and Ruffed Grouse drumming, ushering in the new day along with the songbirds, the land waking up after a winter’s rest. Whatever the weather, we gather in the first light of a new day to worship on the hilltop surrounded by the beauty of the natural world.

This special hilltop is located in the special and unique Driftless Region. Comprising southwestern Wisconsin and portions of southeastern Minnesota, northeast Iowa, and northwest Illinois, this region is named for the lack of glacial drift, indicating that this region was missed by the glaciers that once covered most of the Upper Midwest. This distinctive landscape is known for its steep hills, ridges, bluffs, and spring-fed streams that are home to native Brook Trout. It is also home to some rare and unique ecosystems-like the “goat prairies” on the bluffs near the Mississippi River-and relic populations of plants and animals more commonly found north or south of this region.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus proclaims a message of transformation, a message that turns our notions of being successful and blessed upside down. From the mountaintop, Jesus brings us the vision of the Kingdom of God that has come to Earth, the kingdom that continues to be revealed to us. Jesus speaks to a crowd that has lived under the rule of the Roman Empire-an empire of conquest colonization, and expansion, an empire that subjugates and enslaves, that keeps the peace by the point of the sword. An empire that saw the world as something to be conquered, controlled, and shaped to serve human needs and desires.

In its expansion, Rome left in its wake lands damaged and degraded through deforestation, overgrazing, and intensive agriculture. Are we still stuck on that same road today? Topsoil continues to wash off the fields, reducing fertility and damaging streams, rivers, and lakes. Aquifers are depleting faster than they can recharge, wildlife habitats continue to diminish, and the ever-growing demands for fossil fuels degrade land in extracting them and alter the global climate as they are consumed. In his book “A Sand County Almanac”, Aldo Leopold wrote, *We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see the land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. [[1]](#endnote-1)*  Could a radical reversal for us in the 21st century be to see the land, the Earth, not in monetary value, in productive vs. unproductive, but in the value as the beloved creation of God to which we belong? A precious world, a precious gift, in which we have been commissioned as caretakers. May we see the Kingdom of God in the uniqueness of the landscapes on which we live; may we approach the land in humility and respect, not as conquerors but as co-creators with God.

May prophetic voices continue to ring out, calling on us to be healers bringing about restoration and reconciliation in God’s good Earth.

<http://theecoexperts.co.uk/blog/roman-empire-impact>.

<http://sustainabledriftless.org>

*Luke Pederson in a Synodically Authorized Minster (S.A.M.) serving the congregations of Trinity of Norden and Good Shepherd, Mondovi WI, in the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin. He lives near Strum WI on 40 acres where he works on restoring wildlife habitat by restoring native prairie and planting trees.*



1. A Sand County Almanac, Aldo Leopold, 1948. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)